The fabulous opera

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INTRODUCTION

Hic nullus labor est ruborque nullus:
Hoc iuvit, iuvat et diu iuvabit;
Hoc non deficit incipitque semper.

PETRONIUS ARBITER.

I

The first and most important problem which every student of the aesthetics of poetry will have to solve for himself, is the question whether the poetical faculty is to be identified with the intuition or with the intellect. After many centuries of thought and controversy no agreement has been reached on this head. Whereas Croce and Bremond, for example, unconditionally identify the poetical faculty with the intuition, Valéry still maintains, though perhaps with less conviction than he used to, that it is the intellect which must be considered as the source of poetry. The easiest way to approach the problem is to compare poetry with the other arts, especially with music, starting from the assumption that all arts are essentially the same and that they only differ in their material of expression; or to put it differently: *a*. All arts aim at expressing in physical symbols what the artists experienced during the moments of inspiration; *b*. All arts are essentially the same though they use different materials and appeal to different senses. The fact, therefore, that music fashions its symbols from sound and composition, painting from colour, lines, and different degrees of 'light', and poetry from words, does not mean that those arts differ in any essential respect. If we turn now to music we are forced to conclude at once that music has no 'meaning', no prose contents, no contents which could be analysed by the intellect. The stories which some people think they hear in music are personal associations which have nothing whatever to do with the music, which merely starts the day-dream. It will also be found that these supposed contents of music vary considerably for each member of a group of persons who have listened to the same piece of music. But if music 'means' nothing, informs the listener of nothing, we have to assume the same for poetry as such. That poetry actually lacks this informative

character and does not consist of a succession of logical statements appears from the fact that one can read a good poem a hundred times or even oftener although the prose-contents must have fully penetrated to the intellect of the reader after the first reading, or at least after the second or third. If therefore a reader gives expression to his preference for a certain poem by reading it often, it cannot be because he wants to go on enriching his knowledge, because in most cases it is comparatively easy to exhaust the prose-contents of a poem intellectually in a few readings. The same reader would never think of reading his daily newspaper a hundred times, though the average newspaper has this advantage over poetry that it contains actual news, whereas poetry, especially the commonest class of poetry, namely love-poetry, has told the same story over and over again from the beginnings of literary history. That it cannot be the meaning which constitutes poetry also appears from the fact that a hymn which repeats the name of God over and over again and refers constantly to the things which are considered most important in a man's life, may have nothing to do with poetry notwithstanding the presence of metre and rhyme, whereas many a small lyric dealing with perfectly insignificant things may belong to the world's great poetry. Bremond in his *Prière et Poésie* refers to the opening line of *Endymion* the original version of which was: "A thing of beauty is a constant joy". Why has this nothing to do with poetry, asks Bremond, whereas the final version "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever" is real poetry? For the meaning of the two versions is absolutely identical. And how is one to explain the aesthetic emotions experienced by the reader of Rilke's "Wer jetzt allein ist wird es lange bleiben"? If one were told the same thing in daily life simply because of the meaning of the statement, one might well remain entirely unmoved. Poetry as such, like all the other forms of art does not consist of a succession of logical statements, is not dependent on the laws which regulate the activities of the intellect. In other words poetry has nothing whatever to do with the intellect, but is created like the other arts by the intuition.

But if poetry is created by the intuition, how is one to explain the fact that so many people mention the intellect as the source of

poetry? Here the problem becomes involved. Every form of art has its own material of expression and every art owes to its particular expressive material the possibility of expressing itself. But at the same time every art is limited by the material on which it depends for expression. If one considers poetry in this connection one feels inclined to consider 'words' as the means of expression for this particular form of art. The fact, however, that many people have left it at that and still leave it at that is responsible for many mistakes made by students of poetry. For a natural result of considering words as constituting the expressive material of poetry is the assumption that poetry and the non-aesthetic use of language, namely prose, have the same material of expression. In order to maintain a distinction between prose and poetry one has tried to consider the presence of metre, rhythm and rhyme as essential for poetry. But on the one hand this proceeding left a gap in so far as it provided no means of deciding when the non-metrical use of language belonged to the realm of art, on the other hand it has long since been proved that neither rhyme nor patterned rhythm or metre are essential for verse and that prose has also a rhythm of its own. But if we are forced to discard those three elements as essential for poetry proper, how are we to distinguish between the aesthetic use of words and the merely communicative use of them? There is but one way to distinguish legitimately between the two. Prose is the use of words for informative purposes and for the expression of logical statements. It obeys the laws of logic and the requirements of truth. Poetry on the other hand is the use of *prose* as a physical symbol for the fixation of the aesthetic experience, so as to enable both poet and reader to reproduce that experience at will. In other words, just as painting expresses itself in lines and colour, music in sounds and composition, poetry expresses itself in prose. It is easy to realise the implications of this thesis. In the first place it nullifies all efforts to make the word as sound the material of poetry; not only because this would lower poetry to an inferior substitute for music, but also because it considers words as such as the expressive elements of poetry. In the second place it makes it easy to see where the intellect actually comes in. The material with which poetry expresses itself, namely prose, is subject to certain intellectual

standards. This, however, does not mean that the intellect has anything whatever to do with poetry itself, but only that the material by means of which the art of poetry fixes the aesthetic experience contains certain intellectual elements. But the qualities of the physical symbols which serve to fix the inspiration do not directly affect the arts themselves. Just as a great painter may paint a great picture with inferior materials a poet may make a great poem with bad prose. For it is not the qualities of prose as prose which determine the aesthetic excellence of the poem, but the completeness with which the prose material has become symbol. All intellectual judgments concerning the prose by means of which a poet expresses himself can never affect the poetry. The conclusions of the above reasoning can be formulated as follows: Prose used for its own communicative purposes remains prose and is subject to intellectual and indirectly to practical standards. As soon as prose no longer confines itself to its own purposes but becomes symbol or 'objective correlative' of an aesthetic experience, an inspiration, it becomes the material of art, and the prose author becomes a poet. For poetry it follows that in order to remain poetry it must never allow the prose-content to dominate over the poetic intention. A poet never can tell a truth for the sake of that truth and never make a statement for the sake of that statement without turning his back on the Muse. Truth is not the object of poetry but its material limitation. This explains for instance why much of the poetry of Browning and Wordsworth is mere prose. The prose-contents of those poems predominate to such an extent over the symbolising function of the prose material that, instead of stimulating the intuition into contemplation by silencing the intellect, the alleged poetry makes all contemplation impossible by stimulating the intellect to a high degree of activity. A parallel can be found in music when the sounds which should only serve as symbols become important in themselves, become noise; or in painting when line and colour, which also should only symbolise, become important in themselves, become mere decoration; or again when the subject of a painting refuses to fulfil its symbolising function and usurps the place of the thing which it was called upon to symbolise. In the last case we have an exact parallel to the

predomination of the prose-contents over poetry. Critics use in such cases the expression 'literature' in the meaning of 'non-aesthetic' or 'anti-aesthetic elements'.

Limitation of space forces me to leave it at that. There is a wealth of good literature on the intuitive nature of poetry. I refer the reader to the *Enneads* of Plotinus, the *Estetica* of Croce, and Bremond's *Prière et Poésie, La poésie pure* and *Racine et Valéry*. Very interesting in this respect is the little fragment of Yen Yü, the complete title of which is to be found in the bibliographical list of this work.

II

If we now compare the poetical activity with the practical activities we may begin by saying that poetry, being a product of the purely theoretical activity of the intuition, can have nothing in common with the practical activities and can never be judged by practical standards. These standards are of a twofold nature, namely such as determine the usefulness of an action and such as determine the moral value of an action.

It is unnecessary to dwell long on the question whether poetry need be useful in order to justify its existence. It is true that poetry may have a useful effect. A poem may for instance acquaint the reader with a historical event of which he was ignorant before, or draw his attention to a country of which he knows little, but it must be borne in mind that the useful effect in such cases originates from the prose-contents of the poem not from the poetry. We have the same in the pictorial arts, where the fact that a self-portrait may acquaint the beholder with certain physical particularities of the painter does not enhance the aesthetic value of the work. Poetry as such cannot teach the reader anything, because the intuition which is responsible for all artistic creation cannot teach, argue or prove. The didactic value of any poem always originates with the prose which carries the poetry but is entirely independent of the poetry and has nothing to do with it. If, however, the didactic intention should predominate in a poem, or, to put it differently, if this particular form of intellectual preoccupation predominates over the symbolising function of the prose which serves as expressive material for this particular

poem, the prose kills the poetry, the instrument turns against its master. Conscious didacticism and poetry can never go together because the intellect and the intuition, though they support and assist each other, can only work in succession and can never be roused to activity at the same time. Owing to the limitations imposed on poetry by the material by means of which it expresses itself, it will be necessary for many people to read a poem first as prose so as to exhaust it intellectually, because otherwise the anxieties of the intellect would interfere with the intuition which needs rest to contemplate. A certain mastery over the expressive material is necessary for every aesthetic enjoyment. But so long as poetry stimulates the intellect, so long as it is useful in a practical way, it has not achieved purity, and remains the slave of its own servant.

It may be useful to refer to another aspect of the intuitive activity in this connection, namely, mystic contemplation. During a period of contemplation the intellect of the mystic becomes entirely neutral, it rests and has no part in the vision. For the mystic 'sees', that is, he does not abstract intellectually. The object of contemplation is not the abstract intellectual concept, but a concrete idea. The absence of every form of intellectual activity on the part of the mystic shows itself in that the mystic does not criticise the vision intellectually, but accepts it passively. It follows that he cannot appraise the vision intellectually after it is gone, for the intellect was dead to all intents and purposes while the vision lasted, and can therefore hardly judge what it does not know. All the intellect can do is to state the fact thus translating the message from the intuition. It is the intellect of the mystic which says "I had a vision", it is the intuition which actually can reproduce the vision. If we compare this with the aesthetic or poetic experience we see immediately that the latter has much in common with mystic contemplation. Bremond in his *Prière et Poésie* has made a careful study of the implications of this similarity between the two intuitive states, and the present writer cannot do better than refer the reader to him. Let it suffice for the present purpose to stress the similarity. By way of practical test it may be useful to remind the reader of the particular circumstances which lend themselves best to the appreciation of poetry. The

mental condition which is most favourable for the pursuit of scholarly or scientific work, lends itself least to the appreciation of poetry. A mind harassed by a problem which it seeks in vain to solve is incapable of aesthetic appreciation. It often happens, especially with youthful persons or people of little taste (taste meaning the ease with which a person can be inspired into contemplation by the physical symbols of the artist) that a poem is considered beautiful because of the truths it contains and the message which it conveys, in other words because of the intensity with which it stimulates the intellect of the reader. From the mere fact, however, that such an appreciation depends entirely on the intellectual consistency of the reader and will change entirely when the reader grows older or when circumstances or a better insight cause him to change his convictions, it is clear that poetry can never be judged on such grounds. Poetry has nothing to do with convictions. The pagan who cannot read poetry of a religious nature because of its contents, cannot read poetry; he can only read prose.

Poetry therefore has nothing to do with the standards which determine the usefulness of an action. It is unnecessary to devote much space to the question whether poetry is affected by its economic value, because any economic value temporarily attached to a poem or series of poems is arbitrary and entirely fictitious. One cannot measure the riches of the spirit with the riches of the earth.

If we now devote our attention to the moral standards, we can again begin by saying that poetry, being created by the theoretical activity of the intuition, can have nothing in common with moral actions as these latter belong to the practical activities.

Poetry falls outside the jurisdiction of the moralist. This of course holds good for either of the theoretical activities, the intuitive or the intellectual. It is impossible to measure thinking by moral standards. The process of thinking by itself can neither be morally good nor morally bad. The thing which forms the subject of the process may be morally bad, but the subject does not affect the activity of thinking itself. It is the same with the intuition. The contemplative or intuitive state can be neither morally good nor bad. Every moral judgment on the activity of the intuition and therefore also on art as such

is a mistake. The person who condemns poetry from a moralist's point of view does not judge poetry but prose. The reader who rejects the *Pièces condamnées* of Baudelaire because of their immorality has no more read poetry than the student who after reading the same series of poems makes a statement regarding the frequency with which a particular word occurs in the series.

As said before, poetry writes with prose and is like all the other arts limited by its material, which can be read *as prose* for innumerable reasons, but as poetry only for one. The people who study the contents of a poem because of their grammar, their syntax, their style, their imaginative technique, their psychology, their importance in connection with the life of the poet, etc., all study prose, but never poetry, because poetry, being a product of the intuition, is only to be approached by the intuition. The element which turns prose into poetry is not analysable by the intellect.

It may be useful to refer in passing to the inconsistency of the moralists when they speak about poetry. When the moralist rejects poetry because it is considered to be immoral, he means always that the immorality is of a certain limited variety. Murders in *Hamlet*, wholesale slaughter in war poetry would never move the moralist to reject a poem. But murder is also morally reprehensible, though it does not seem to affect the poetry. Why should poetry only be spoiled by a particular variety of sin and not by other forms of immorality? If immoral contents in themselves could interfere with the poetic experience, there is no justification for excepting certain forms of sin. It is only fair to add that the moralist has a perfect right to speak his mind about the ethical deficiencies of the prose which a poet uses as his material of expression and as the fixation of his poetic experience, as long as such judgments are not held to affect the poetry itself.

Finally, if we turn to music again, we see immediately that music can never be immoral as long as it is aesthetically satisfactory. So called sensual music is bad music because an informative intention predominates over the symbolising function of the sounds. But if music cannot be immoral as an art, poetry cannot either.

III.

There is one more aspect of poetry which must be discussed. Poetry has nothing whatever to do with reality as it presents itself to our senses, or to put it more colloquially, poetry need not be 'realistic' in order to be good poetry. Poetry is no more an imitation of the world round us than music or painting. The critic who bases his rejection of a lyric on the fact that it is about a flower which the poet ill-advisedly has caused to grow in the wrong season, may be a good botanist, he certainly is a bad critic. But the same holds good of a critic who enthusiastically hails a new play because the characters are 'drawn from life'. For if reality were the criterion of aesthetic excellence, he would be a perfect musician who convincingly imitates the crowing of a cock or the sound of a passing train. The perfect imitator, however, does not belong in the concert hall but on the music-hall stage. And if we compare the art of portrait painting, we see that the aesthetically most satisfactory portrait is not necessarily the one which most faithfully portrays the model's features. Cézanne has formulated this truth in his famous "Oui, c'est horriblement ressemblant."

If we compare poetry again with mysticism we can easily see why art has nothing to do with imitation. As said above, the poetic experience has this in common with the mystic experience that in both instances of contemplation the intellect is silenced entirely in order to enable the intuition to contemplate in peace. But it is not only the intellect which becomes entirely inactive during the moments of mystic contemplation. The senses also cease to operate in their accustomed manner. It is as if they turned inward, as if a curtain were drawn between them and the objects which otherwise they perceive. And the subject of contemplation is entirely spiritual, has no physical qualities and therefore does not stimulate the senses. It is the innermost ego which 'sees' during the mystic experience with 'the eyes of the spirit', while the eyes of the body are closed to the world before them and the ears hear no more the sounds of every day. Something similar happens to the poet during his moments of inspiration. Like the mystic he is 'united' with the subject of contemplation. He approaches it from the inside,

not from the outside through the senses. There is, however, this difference between the poet and the mystic, that the former tries to fix in *physical* symbols the *spiritual* thing which he has seen intuitively, whereas the mystic in most cases rests satisfied with the mere contemplation (when the mystic also fixes his visions, he becomes a poet). But though the poet makes use of physical symbols to fix the poetic experience he cannot imitate a spiritual thing, because it is not the senses which perceived but the intuition which contemplated. Imitation is the artificial reproduction of a *physical* impression. But the intuition cannot receive a physical impression. The poet therefore cannot reproduce what he has not perceived, he can only express symbolically what he has seen spiritually. Imitation and art exclude each other. All judgments consequently which are based on realistic standards can never be aesthetic judgments. A typical example of realistic 'criticism' was mentioned in a London evening paper in January of this year. A famous surgeon visiting an exhibition of nudes in a Bond Street art gallery remarked that the painters of to-day could no longer paint, because none of the women he saw represented in the paintings would be able to stand on their feet if they should actually come to life. The most obvious answer to this particular piece of bad criticism would be to refer the critic to the innumerable portraits and nudes among acknowledged masterpieces of the world's painting showing men or women with such obvious physical defects (for instance El Greco's figures!) that none of them could be expected to live, if at all, without acute discomfort or suffering. What the surgeon actually criticised was the anatomy of the bodies which he saw, as if they were living persons instead of physical symbols for intuitive visions. Like so many experts he read the prose of the paintings and the poetry was lost on him.

It may be profitable to refer in passing to the cubists who suffered much from ridicule, especially in the popular press, but who had a better insight into the relation between art and reality than any other school in the history of art. It is true that many of them were better aestheticians than artists (thus illustrating the fact that an intellectual preoccupation often interferes with intuitive purity), but they understood that the physical symbols used to fix the inspiration had nothing to do

with visible reality, except in so far as every physical symbol must show an accidental similarity with actually existing things. But in order to avoid that the symbol should usurp the place of the thing symbolised, they took care to keep their symbols as neutral as possible and to prevent the symbols from placing themselves between the beholder and the aesthetic vision.

There is one more characteristic of poetry which must be mentioned here. The comparison between poetry or art in general and mysticism made above for different reasons is still further justified by the fact that there is another feature which the two forms of intuitive activity have in common. It is the aim of the mystic to become united with the thing contemplated. The subject of contemplation for the mystic in the narrower sense of the word is always God. But there are other forms of mysticism, of a lower grade. We speak for instance of 'nature mysticism', which is that form of mysticism in which the mystic becomes united with nature. There is also 'love mysticism', in which the contemplative person becomes united with the beloved. But in all those cases the mystic loses his identity in order to become one with the subject of contemplation. This same loss of identity occurs in every poet and in every artist during the inspiration. In colloquial speech we say of a dramatist that he has become entirely one with his characters. But this holds good for all subjects contemplated in any form of art during the aesthetic experience.

The foregoing survey of the basic principles of aesthetics serves a double purpose. In the first place it expresses the author's personal convictions on the subject and will facilitate the understanding of the terminology used in the text. In the second place it may be regarded as a synthesis (the only possible one, in the author's opinion) of the aesthetic convictions of the nineteenth century poets with whom the work deals.

It has often been noted that there is a striking similarity between the poetry of early romanticism in England and the poetry of the French symbolists and their immediate forerunners.[1] It is the author's intention to show in the following pages that this similarity is also evident in the aesthetic and metaphysical ideas held by the two groups of poets. At the same time the

author has made it his task to make it clear that the parallelism between the poets of the two countries is not confined to the early romantics on the one side and the symbolists on the other. The same aesthetic convictions run through the works of the nineteenth-century poets in England from Blake to Yeats and in France from Sainte-Beuve to Maeterlinck. In the choice of the poets whom the author has studied with regard to their aesthetic convictions he has been guided exclusively by a desire to maintain unity in his work, confining his attention to those poets who show a similarity of thought concerning the three fundamental problems discussed in sections I, II, and III of the Introduction, and excluding those who, though they may show similarities in certain respects, differ materially from the other poets in one or more of the others. The English poets dealt with are Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Francis Thompson, Russell and Yeats. Among the French poets the author has confined his attention to those who may be considered to be the direct forerunners of the symbolists, including two or three representatives of the symbolist movement itself: Sainte-Beuve, de Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Verlaine, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Mallarmé, and Maeterlinck. As it is impossible to study this particular period of French poetry without dealing with Edgar Allan Poe, the latter has also been included. It will be found that Baudelaire has been awarded more space than any of the other poets. This is due to the fact that Baudelaire left behind him a larger body of aesthetic writings than the others. At the same time it is a fact that from whatever angle one approaches Baudelaire, he always appears as the central figure of the literature of his time. The reader will soon notice that the author has let the poets speak for themselves as far as possible, elaborating their opinions only where it appeared advisable or necessary.